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ABSTRACT

This study examined teacher authority in the classroom. Researchers spent one semester in a college composition class observing each class session, taking field notes, and tape recording the classes. Data collection also involved: interviews with five students throughout the semester; two anonymous background surveys of the class; an instructor interview; student e-mails and writing; and a tape-recorded discussion with the whole class without the instructor present. Results indicated that the instructor relied primarily on an indirect, middle-class authority structure discourse. Most commands were in the form of I statements, with content conveyed through class discussion. Students responded promptly and without question to teacher commands. They had a strong degree of trust in the instructor and internalization of the traditional classroom structure. Most students had a sense of the instructor watching and judging them, despite characterizing the instructor as easygoing. No direct instruction of writing occurred, but in their writing, students followed traditional structures. Students' backgrounds were consistent with discussions in the literature of an authority relationship characterized by indirect commends, politeness, and trust in the professor: predominantly white, middle- or upper-class children of professional parents, with backgrounds in college preparatory classes. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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ED 446 031

AUTHORITY DISCOURSE: AN EXAMINATION OF ONE CLASSROOM'S AUTHORITY STRUCTURE

We all know how to behave in a classroom by now. (anonymous student, 2/11/99)

The teacher tells you to do something and you do it; it starts in pre-school. When they tell you, okay, it's lunch time, everybody sit down and have your snacks, and we do it. (Peter, 3/10/99)

The Study

This study examines the workings of teacher authority in an actual classroom, in contrast to the more common theoretical discussions of authority. The methods of information gathering were primarily ethnographic in nature. I spent one semester—twenty-four class sessions—in a college composition class of 18 students at a private university, observing each class session, taking field notes and tape recording (all but four class sessions were held in a computer lab). I also interviewed five class members throughout the semester, recording and transcribing the interview sessions; conducted two anonymous background surveys of the class; interviewed the instructor; read student-instructor e-mails and student writing; and conducted a tape-recorded discussion with the class as a whole, without the instructor present.

The study demonstrates the degree of internalization of authority structures on the part of these students and suggests that the authority discourse at work here is a construction particular to the dominant class background of the students and instructor.

The Research Question

Numerous writers have proposed reconfigurations, redistribution, or new conceptions of classroom authority (e.g., Giroux, 1992; Leitch, 1985; Spring, 1994; Bruffee, 1984; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Mortenson & Kirsch, 1993). Most such propositions deal with authority in the theoretical, abstract sense, without confronting the realities of what actually happens in a classroom. I sought to examine authority in the specific and local sense, to look at the "authority discourse" in a college composition class in order to understand how the instructor's authority manifests itself and how the students respond to those manifestations; this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- **Is it possible to describe classroom authority as a discourse, a system of signs?**
- **How and why does this authority discourse function smoothly?**

Findings

Field notes and classroom recordings reveal that the instructor relied primarily on the indirect, middle-class authority discourse described in Mason, 1994, and Delpit, 1997: most "commands" came in the form of "I statements," and content was conveyed through class discussion. In class sessions in which the instructor was leading the class (one class session was primarily taught by computer-lab personnel, and three were led by student groups), there was an average of 7.1 commands per class. On average,

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- 2.6 of the commands were "I-statement" commands (e.g., "I'd like you to write a response")
- .65 used a "let's" construction (e.g., "Let's do some writing on this subject")
- .88 used a "we" construction (e.g., "We're going to share our writings now")
- 2.8 were more direct, using imperative verbs
- 51% of the direct commands were for relatively minor or physical tasks (e.g., "Print your writing when you've finished" or "Turn to look at the screen in front")
- 18% of the direct commands were related to the time remaining in a task (e.g., "Take five minutes to finish up").

Except for new computer-software information, all content instruction came in the form of class discussion.

The students, in turn, responded promptly and without question to the instructor's "commands," even when they had been given no purpose for a particular task or activity, although the instructor rarely indicated purposes or goals.

Interviews with students indicate a strong degree of trust in the instructor as well as internalization of the traditional classroom authority structure:

- four of the five interview subjects explicitly indicated trust in the instructor, in terms of his activities and assignments benefiting them
- four located the main source of the instructor's authority in his position as an employee of the university (see Gale, 1996, and Delpit, 1997)
- four also stated that they found some assignments pointless or that they did not know some assignments' purposes
- all five said that they had been "trained" in the correct way to behave in school
- three equated maturity with compliance with authority
- four assumed that polite behavior was the standard for college students in the classroom
- three were baffled by the possibility that college students might "misbehave"
- four went so far as to equate questioning an instructor about an assignment's purpose with disrespectful behavior.

Most students had a sense of the instructor "watching" and judging them, despite characterizing the instructor as "easygoing" or "laid back":

- three interview subjects described a sense that the instructor was keeping track of their behavior, with the results of this "scorecard" appearing in their grades
- all five described him as relaxed and easy going in the classroom
- in the whole-class conversation, other students indicated that they assumed that the instructor was keeping track of them or being critical of them, even when there was no direct evidence to suggest that he was doing so
- they assumed that a lack of response from the instructor indicated disapproval
- they, too, described him as easy going.

No direct instruction of writing occurred in this class, but in their writing, the students followed traditional structures: introduction and thesis, body paragraphs with topic sentences, a summarizing conclusion. The arguments were safe, not extreme, with more space devoted to the work of experts than to the students' own analysis and ideas. This conventionality and safety

were in contrast to the quite open, unstructured class discussions, in which the instructor rarely spoke directly or offered his own opinion.

The class members' backgrounds were consistent with the discussions in the literature of an authority relationship characterized by indirect commands, politeness, and trust in the professor: predominantly white, middle- or upper-middle class children of professional parents, with backgrounds in college-preparatory classes:

- all but three students were white
- 43% of all survey respondents described their background as middle class
- 57% described their background as upper-middle class
- 57% of the respondents attended public schools
- 43% attended private schools
- 71% described their high-school classes as "college prep"
- 29% stated they had heterogeneous classes
- the interview subjects described their upbringings as free of physical or harsh punishment.

Conclusions

As revealed in this composition class, the classroom authority does involve a particular discourse, although not one that is fully systematic and predictable; it can be characterized, however, as relying upon indirect commands, instruction through guided class discussion, and the students' trust in the professor. The evidence from this study indicates that such a discourse succeeds because college freshmen with this group's demographics

- participate in a heavily internalized authority discourse
- respond readily to indirect commands
- do not require explanations of rewards or punishments because they have internalized a pattern of trusting and following authority
- assume certain rewards will result from doing as the instructor requires (good grades, a sense of maturity)
- do not appear to seek satisfaction beyond those rewards
- see outright rebellion—when they can even conceive of it—as a sign of immaturity, something to move beyond.

In short, their goal is to carry on the academic status quo.

The importance and relevance of this study is twofold:
First, composition instructors push their students to write essays with original arguments and theses; the evidence presented here suggests that students might fall short of this goal not due to a lack of ideas but instead due to their internalization of an authority relationship that by its very nature will restrict them as writers. These students were encouraged to speak and think freely in class, but few raised challenging ideas, and in the absence of instruction in how to express strong opinions—or a requirement to do so—they fell back on cautious, conventional writing.
Second, this study suggests that renegotiating authority relationships is a far more formidable task than previous writers have recognized: if students have internalized the traditional authority structure to such a degree by age eighteen, anyone attempting renegotiation must recognize that one-semester, superficial pedagogical changes will probably have little lasting effect on students

and will likely only indicate the students' "playing along" to continue to please the teacher and earn the appropriate rewards.

Further study is needed to determine the generalizability of these findings beyond a private, predominantly white, affluent institution and to determine possible differences in discourse in other institutions (writings about race and class differences in academia suggest that such discourse differences exist; see Bloom, 1996; Delpit, 1997; Ernest, 1998; Frey, 1998; Mason, 1994; Railey, 1998; and Shor, 1996). Also, the possible effects of internalized authority on student learning remain to be discovered.

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